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ACTION EAP-00

INFO	LOG-00	NP-00	AID-00	CA-00	CIAE-00	INL-00	DODE-00
	DS-00	OIGO-00	UTED-00	H-00	TEDE-00	INR-00	LAB-01
	NSAE-00	NIMA-00	EPAU-00	PA-00	GIWI-00	SGAC-00	SP-00
	SSO-00	SS-00	EVR-00	FMP-00	EPAE-00	IIP-00	DSCC-00
	PRM-00	DRL-00	NFAT-00	SAS-00	SWCI-00	/001W	

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FM AMCONSUL HO CHI MINH CITY
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1626
INFO AMEMBASSY HANOI PRIORITY
ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

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SUBJECT: HUE DEMONSTRATES PROGRESS ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM ISSUES

REF: A) HCMC 586; B) Hanoi 767; C) 04 Hanoi 916 D) 03 HCMC 1010

1. (SBU) Summary: During a recent visit to Hue, Catholic and Protestant leaders painted a picture of an increasingly tolerant provincial leadership. Overall, they have made more tangible progress in urban areas than in the rural hinterland. There is budding cooperation between religious groups and the province on HIV/AIDS issues. Some religious leaders are ignorant of, or reluctant to press the government to implement favorable provisions of the new legal framework on religion. Voicing a different view from others in his organization, a senior monk of the outlawed United Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) told us that he could envision compromise with the Communists, were the GVN to give the UBCV real independence to manage its internal affairs. (Ref A reports separately on our meeting in Hue with activist Father Nguyen Van Ly.) End Summary.

Local Government Says It Supports Religion

2. (SBU) During the visit of the CG and a ConGen team to Hue May 23 to 25, PolOff met with local government officials and religious leaders to assess developments in religious freedom in the province. Duong Viet Hong, Chairman of the Provincial Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA), emphasized that the province is committed to implementing Vietnam's new legal framework for religion. Religion plays an important role in Thua Thien Hue Province. At least 60 percent of the province's one million residents are religious, 550,000 of them Buddhist. There are another 52,000 Catholics in the province; the Archdiocese, which also covers Quang Tri Province, has 65,000 believers. The two most difficult issues between the CRA and the Buddhist and Catholic churches are the return of expropriated property and the role of religious institutions in education. The CRA's position is that the bulk of expropriated land should be considered a "contribution." The CRA also does not encourage Catholic and Buddhist Churches to open their own primary and secondary schools; if they did, they would have to use the standard GVN curriculum. All religious organizations are free to conduct after-hours religious instruction for children.

3. (SBU) Protestantism has not made significant inroads in Hue. The CRA listed two churches affiliated with the GVN-recognized Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV) with roughly 260 followers. The CRA is aware of a few small Protestant house churches operating in the province. Each one has no more than 40 believers. The CRA Chairman claimed that the province is encouraging house churches to register under the new law.

4. (SBU) Chairman Hong did not touch on the outlawed United Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) and was visibly uncomfortable discussing the visit of France-based Buddhist leader Thich Nhat Hanh to Hue earlier in the year. The province "facilitated and welcomed the visit," which made a "good impression" on Hue's faithful. He had no comment on Thich Nhat Hanh's recommendations to the GVN on the separation of church and state and encouraging reconciliation between the GVN-recognized Vietnam Buddhist Sangha (VBS) and the UBCV (ref B).

Protestant House Churches: Pressure Easing Slightly

5. (SBU) In a modest home in Hue city we met with Pastor Nguyen Van Phai, who runs a 40-person house church affiliated with the Vietnam Evangelical Fellowship (VEF). Pastor Phai said that there are four house churches operating in the province, each with thirty to forty members. While police scrutiny remains heavy, the police have not stopped or harassed services over the past six

months. The police presence has intimidated some from joining the church. The police also have requested that the church subdivide into smaller units when its membership grows beyond 50 persons. Phai had never met with the CRA and would not initiate contact with the CRA or the police. The pastor had read the Prime Minister's February Instruction on Protestantism and the Ordinance on Religion. He was willing to register his church under the new legal framework, but was waiting for the HCMC-based leadership of the VEF to negotiate on his behalf. (Note: Police had stationed an officer in an adjacent room inside the Pastor's home during the meeting; the Pastor was also summoned for interviews with local police prior to and after the meeting.)

The SECV: Getting Better All the Time

16. (SBU) Ma Phuc Hiep, the Pastor in Charge of the SECV in the province, was glowing in his description of the treatment the SECV had been receiving in Hue over the past year. As the SECV congregation in Hue was small, about 600 persons, he splits his time between Hue and Danang, where he lives. In the past, he had to obtain permission from Hue authorities each time he wished to travel to Hue; now he can travel freely as well as distribute religious materials that he obtains in Danang. The SECV in Thua

Thien Hue is primarily urban-based; only one of its 11 churches is in a rural area. While local government in rural areas is more restrictive, even there he has seen improvement. The SECV maintains excellent relations with the Catholic Archdiocese. As good as the situation is in Hue, it is better in Danang. For example, the SECV recently was able to hold a series of well-publicized evangelical "crusades" to attract new members. This type of activity was never permitted before, Hiep said.

Catholic Church

17. (SBU) Associate Bishop Le Van Hong, Father Duong Quynh, Chancellor of the Archdiocese, and Father Le Van Thang, Secretary of the Archbishop's Office, told us that the situation today for the 52,000 Catholic believers in the province was far improved from a decade ago. The diocese has a "generally open" relationship with the local government. Hong noted with satisfaction that a group of priests and nuns have been collaborating with the local government, a Scandinavian NGO (NAV) based in Hue and monks of the VBS to deliver hospice and in-hospital care to the province's AIDS patients. Urban areas in the diocese are particularly free from acrimony, but the Church does experience problems in establishing new congregations in more remote rural areas, particularly in the two districts with a heavy ethnic minority population. The Church also contends with a serious shortage of priests. While there are 120 on the books, for various reasons only 80 are working in the province's 46 parishes. Some priests have to conduct three or four services every Sunday. The Archdiocese also has been unable to make much process in securing the return or receiving compensation for expropriated property.

18. (SBU) Bishop Hong said that the Archdiocese is still examining how to implement Vietnam's new legal framework on religion. A number of provisions remain "ambiguous or unclear." He admitted, however, that he has not yet reviewed the new laws closely to see how the Archdiocese could best test the new legal provisions.

Buddhists: A Thaw Between the VBS and UBCV?

19. (SBU) The Venerable Gia Quang, Standing Vice-Chairman of the GVN-recognized Vietnam Buddhist Sangha (VBS), and his two assistants were not prepared to have a substantive discussion with us. Quang shrugged off questions about the impact of Thich Nhat Hanh's visit to Hue, saying only that it had a "very good impact." He had not read any of Thich Nhat Hanh's reflections on the visit and said that, as far as the VBS is concerned, it has no problems at all.

10. (SBU) One of Quang's assistants was much more forthcoming as we walked and talked during a tour of his pagoda. Buddhism is very strong in Hue and the authorities keep a very close eye on the community. Despite efforts to outlaw it, the UBCV has a strong presence. Since the visit of Thich Nhat Hanh, UBCV and VBS monks have begun praying together, a development that our monk viewed as positive and significant.

11. (SBU) Following our official call on the VBS, we met with Thich Thien Hanh, the senior-most member of the outlawed UBCV in Hue (strictly protect). (This visit came off after much debate with our provincial handlers; ref C details how the GVN had blocked a prior USG visit to Hanh in March 2004.) Hanh told us that he has been under unofficial pagoda arrest since October 2003, when the UBCV attempted to hold an organizational meeting in Binh Dinh Province (ref D). He was prevented from leaving the pagoda to visit UBCV General Secretary Thich Quang Do in HCMC in 2004. However, in April 2005 he was allowed to travel to Binh Dinh Province to visit the ailing UBCV patriarch Thich Huyen Quang. However, the 75-year old monk was not allowed to overnight

in Binh Dinh and was forced to return to Hue the same day.

12. (SBU) Hanh said he had a very extensive meeting with Thich Nhat Hanh, who visited the UBCV monk in his pagoda. He portrayed Thich Nhat Hanh as naive in expecting that he would be able to promote independence of the Buddhist Church from the GVN and the "coexistence of the VBS and UBCV." Hanh said that the UBCV remains very much alive, albeit under intense pressure in Hue. Hanh asserted that in recent years he has formed what is in effect a breakaway group of 200 VBS monks operating in 40 pagodas and three training schools in Hue and Quang Tri Provinces. Doctrinally there is no difference between the VBS and UBCV, but GVN interference in VBS personnel matters has led to unqualified persons performing religious rituals, an unacceptable outcome.

13. (SBU) Hanh said that personally he would be willing to merge with the VBS and operate under current Vietnamese law, were that combined organization completely independent from the GVN. He acknowledged that this approach deviated from that of UBCV General Secretary Thich Quang Do. Hanh asked for ConGen's view of the

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future of the UBCV. PolOff observed that the GVN views the UBCV

as a threat, in part because of its historical legacy of social activism in Vietnam. PolOff also observed that those religious organizations that manage to avoid political issues, such as Catholic Church and the SECV, recently have found it easier to deal with the GVN. Hanh said that he agreed and added parenthetically "I wish you would tell this to Thich Quang Do and Thich Tue Si (another UBCV leader under pagoda arrest in HCMC). He explained that their strategy is to agitate for maximal political change in Vietnam with a hope that the GVN then might seek compromise and allow an independent UBCV.

Comment

14. (SBU) Many of the religious freedom trends in Hue are being played out across Southern Vietnam. On the plus side, there is noticeably greater interaction between local provincial officials and the Catholic Church and the SECV. Pressure on Protestant house churches is decreasing and some are in the process of formally registering under Vietnam's new religious law. Also encouraging is the budding partnership between local government, the VBS and Catholic Church on HIV/AIDS issues. On the downside, the GVN's new mantra of greater religious freedom has not yet penetrated consistently into rural areas, even where there are no ethnic-minority/majority problems. Provincial-level officials are not yet getting the word out about new GVN policies effectively down to the village level. And religious leaders, conditioned by decades of GVN antagonism, are hesitant to press local officials to ensure that more favorable provisions of the new legal framework on religion are applied consistently.

15. (SBU) Thich Thien Hanh was the first UBCV leader to suggest to ConGen that compromise with the Communist Party was at all possible. Nonetheless, Hue officials made it perfectly clear that they continue to view the UBCV as a significant internal threat. They also keep the VBS on a very tight leash. Our meeting with Hanh made it clear why. Flanked by three young, stone-faced acolytes, the 75-year old Hanh was physically frail but possessed charisma and an aura of authority that his VBS colleagues did not have. Informally, the VBS monk we met spoke highly of him. One of our government minders seemed to think so too, bowing noticeably as Hanh greeted us at the door of his pagoda.

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